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ABSTRACT

This article is a response to an earlier article, in which Daniel E. Griffiths argued that improved "homework" by organizational theorists offers a realistic prospect for establishing "a solid theoretical base for educational administration." This article argues that theory in administration treats the external trappings of organizations but fails to come to grips with their ideological content. The discussion focuses on four questions: 1) What are organizations? 2) What is theory in organizational studies? 3) How should organizational research proceed? and 4) What are the implications for training administrators? (Author/JG)

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THEORY ABOUT WHAT?

Some More Thoughts About Theory In Educational Administration

by

T. Barr Greenfield

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In sharing his thoughts about theory in educational administration (**UCEA Review**, October, 1975), Griffiths uses my paper delivered at the 1974 International Intervisitation Programme to conclude that improved "homework" offers us a realistic prospect for establishing "a solid theoretical base for educational administration."[1] By "homework," Griffiths means more of the same approaches and thinking which for the past two decades have guided theory and research in educational administration--but better done, presumably. Griffiths reaches this sanguine conclusion after examining the tiny and threadbare fabric of existing theory and demonstrating its irrelevance to most of what goes on in the world of practical administrative affairs. Griffiths provides no new insight into how we are to improve our homework, how we are to develop theories which would deal with major realities in educational administration and would inform a relevant and cogent corpus of research.

An Act of Faith

Lacking visible means to achieve a general theory of educational administration, we should recognize the claim that such theory is possible for what it is: an act of faith. And when we come to appreciate the significance of this realization, we may begin to move towards the kind of theory which powerfully expresses organizational realities--a theory which deals with organizations in ideological terms. If organizations are mechanisms for maintaining and imposing ideas, a theory of organization and administration must deal with the content of the ideas as well as the process and structure which sustains them. A major theme in my 1974 IIP paper was the explanation of an assumption built into current organization theory which acts as a blind spot to exclude consideration of ideology and its function in controlling behaviour within organizations. Griffiths' failure to deal with these arguments in my paper must

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surely have left his audience and the two commentators wondering what all the fuss at IIP 1974 had been about.

In responding, therefore, to Griffiths' reaffirmation of our present approaches to theory in the study of educational administration, I feel as though I am already working from five feet down. I am almost buried before the opportunity for reply reaches me. While the two commentators on Griffiths' paper were, of course, limited by his reconstruction of the issues which were joined in the IIP debate, they do increase my feeling that two-if not three strikes-have already passed the plate before I can reach it. Both of them endorsed Griffiths' conclusion that the theory movement, as we have known it for twenty years, is basically on the right track, though Levine's endorsement shifts the focus from grand to particularistic theory and from structure to practice, while Monahan, mindful of his new book, gives thanks that Götterdämmerung for the newly established deities of administrative theory is not approaching after all.

Let me make my position clear immediately then, and it is the position which my 1974 IIP paper hit home with a force which upset some of the conference participants. Why it upset them will, I hope, be more apparent from this explication than it is from Griffiths' summary of it. To characterize my paper, as he does, as an attack upon a theory priesthood in the study of educational administration is to trivialize and distort the argument I was making; it also ignores the strong interest and support which the paper evoked among many of those who were present. If I were to take the priesthood angle seriously--the word does not appear in the paper itself--I would at least be compelled to wonder why Jovian shafts of displeasure flashed at me from some senior American scholars present at the conference and why they responded to the paper as though it defiled the holiest places in the temple. "Poorly informed," and "naive" were their kindliest descriptions of me and the paper. If there is justification for these *ad hominem* remarks, I find it not in the fact that my paper has been discussed in such terms, but in the fact that such discussion has served to deflect consideration of the major points I was making. The academic point to be made here, and it is one which constitutes the central thrust of my paper, is that ideas are socially maintained and manipulated. This observation applies as strongly to ideas about organizations and administration as it does to any other ideas. Theory about organizations must therefore deal not only with their process and structure but also with their ideological content. My basic criticism of theory in administration is that it treats the external trappings of organizations, but fails to come to grips with their ideological content. Since it is the ideological component of organizations which is specific to their historic and cultural context and subject to temporal flux, theory which considers only organizational structure and process achieves a spurious universality by leaving out of consideration what concerns us most in organizations--what is being done within them and through them, who is doing it and how.

In this rejoinder to Griffiths and his commentators, I find it difficult to avoid repeating arguments which I have already set forth in earlier papers. One of these is readily available[2] and the other, the IIP paper, was recently published in a revised version.[3] Both papers are also filed with ERIC. What might be useful at this point would be an examination of four questions which run through my papers and Griffiths' thoughts on theory. These are: What are organizations? What is theory about them? How should research into them proceed? What are the implications for the training of administrators? While my answers to these will be familiar to those who attended the 1974 IIP, it may be useful to repeat them here, since I have the impression that they have received more consideration outside of UCEA institutions than they have within them.[4]

What are organizations?

We commonly speak of organizations as if they were real. Neither scholar nor layman finds difficulty with talk in which organizations 'serve functions', 'adapt to their environment,' 'clarify their goals' or 'act to implement policy.' What it is that serves, adapts, clarifies or acts seldom comes into question. Underlying widely accepted notions about organizations, therefore, stands the apparent assumption that organizations are not only real but also distinct from the actions, feelings and purposes of people. In contrast, I am arguing that it is an ill-founded dualism which separates people and organizations. As a result, theory and research have frequently set out on a false path in trying to understand organizations and have given us a misplaced confidence in our ability to deal with their problems. If we see organizations and individuals as inextricably intertwined, it may not be so easy to alter organizations, or to lead them, or to administer them without touching something unexpectedly human. More importantly, the belief in the reality and independence of organizations permits us to separate the study of organizations from the study of people and their particular values, habits, and beliefs. The common view in organization studies holds that people occupy organizations in somewhat the way they inhabit houses. The tenants may change but, apart from wear and tear, the basic structures remain the same. The structures are usually seen as invariate over time and place, as universal forms into which individuals may move from time to time, bringing with them idiosyncracies which do little more than colour their performances of the roles prescribed by the organization.

An Alternate View

An alternate view of organizations has its roots in European philosophy and social science, though it is a view which also finds substantial through minority support in American social science. It is also a view which is central in the writings of Max Weber, though it would be hard to guess this from the presentation of Weber's views in organization theory. That Griffiths finds my view of Weber "strange" is testimony to the risks of relying upon Weberian theory as it is presented in much of current writings about organization. Weber's cross is that he is more frequently quoted than read--an ironic fate for a man who developed the method of "Verstehen," the method which explores social phenomena from the individual's view outwards. The irony is compounded when we consider that Weber also made major explorations into the question of what science means when a value-free social science does not exist.

For Weber, non-rational values as explainers of behaviour were as important as the rational ones which he saw embodied in bureaucracy. For him the political consequences of the applications of bureaucratic control were more important than the mechanism of control itself. But of all this we see little in our texts on organization theory which rest content when they have named Weber's six characteristics of bureaucracy and seldom consider any dysfunctions of bureaucracy which run beyond their possible ill-effects upon highly motivated and highly-strung professionals. To Weber it seemed likely that people outside of bureaucracies would suffer more from them than anyone inside them. Can this judgement be doubted now in a period when the policies and effects of our social organizations are seriously in question? Unless we conceive of organizations as inventions of the human mind which we use to control ourselves and others, we are unlikely to consider or study the significant issues in education or other social spheres which have an organizational basis.

While Griffiths recognizes this wider conception of organization in outlining and accepting Cohen, March, and Olson's Garbage Can Model, he and his commentators are unwilling to accept the model's implications, since they lead inevitably into a consideration of what organization theory has been unwilling to accept as a proper study, namely, the "nature, interests, and values of those who are instrumental in maintaining" organizations, as Mayntz has argued.[6]

This unwillingness to look at the human foundation of organizational life betrays at best the dysfunctions of received theory which is what most of organization theory is. At worst it signifies an allegiance to existing power structures within contemporary organizations. Griffiths, Levine, and Lord Morris of Grasmere all express concern that, "The people do not want to be governed." While this development may be a reasonable concern for governors, and indeed for the governed, it should not lead organization theorists to rush to the aid of governors on the grounds that they are defending and fulfilling organization theory in doing so. Instead, organization theorists should pay attention to how notions of control and mechanisms for control are changing in organizations so that they may devise a better theory of what organizations are.

The notion that organizations depend upon meaning and purposes which individuals bring to organizations does not require that all individuals share the same meanings and purposes. On the contrary, the views I am outlining here should make us seek to discover the varying meanings and objectives that individuals bring to the organizations of which they are a part. We should look more carefully, too, for differences in objectives between different kinds of people in organizations and begin to relate these to differences in power or access to resources.

In particular, it appears that we should look closely at this matter in people-processing organizations such as schools, hospitals, and prisons. Many organizations of this kind face some kind of crisis today. In the past, their clients were usually regarded not as members of the organization, but as the raw materials upon which the structure and technology of the organizations worked. That view turned out to be tenable only so long as clients accepted that definition themselves. What we are apparently witnessing today is a shift in belief--a shift in goal--among those members of organizations whom we usually call clients. Increasingly frequent prison riots may reflect the view, growing among both prisoners and wardens alike, that prisons are not places in which people should be put.[7] Where prisoners used to strive to escape from prison, they now likely seek to destroy it. Similarly, new views about what school ought to be are growing--views that are not to be found in official statements of educational objectives or in a functional analysis of school-environment relationships. Bereiter shows how a set of new social "facts" can alter the whole basis of school as an institution, even though these "facts" may be perceived and acted upon as goals by only a small minority:

> What seems to be happening is that the perspective of the outer world is penetrating the school. The traditional school cannot survive such an invasion, for if goings on in school came to be judged by the same standards as goings on outside, they will be seen as ridiculous and the structure will collapse. You cannot have a room full of ten-year old Paul Goodmans and Edgar Z. Friedenbergs and hope to run a traditional school, especially if the teacher holds the same viewpoint.[8]

This view of organization permits us to speak of the dominating demands and beliefs of some individuals, and allows us to explore how those with dominating views use the advantage of their positions. We need not, however, think of these dominating views as "necessary," "efficient," "satisfying," or even

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"functional," but merely as an invented social reality, which holds for a time and is then vulnerable to redefinition through changing demands and beliefs among people. Understandings of organizations must therefore reflect the specifics of social, cultural, and historic conditions. They must reflect how certain beliefs and ideologies come to prevail over others. In this way, conceiving organizations as invented social reality leads from ideology to a new theoretical conception of organization.

What is Theory in Organization Studies?

Most contemporary organization theory assumes that organizations are knowable as they are, although the acquisition of such knowledge requires the intervention and help of scientists, who create theories which enable us to understand what would otherwise remain mysterious and opaque to us. The ultimate reality about organization or the best approximations of it are therefore to be discovered by the application of the scientific method and similar forms of rational analysis. In organization theory, the prevailing image is that of the system or the organism. Organizations exist; they are observable entities which have a life of their own. Organizations are like people in this theory, although sometimes the image is more that of the recalcitrant child rather than the mature adult. In any case, the theory endows organizations with many human properties. They have goals towards which they direct their activities; they respond and adapt to their environments. Nor can organizations escape the fate of organisms ill-adapted to their environments. Indeed, the fate of organizations depends upon their ability to adapt to an increasingly complex and turbulent environment. Following the Darwinian logic inherent in their image of the organization, systems theorists like Bennis[9] see small quick-witted, democratic organizations replacing the ponderous, bureaucratic forms now expiring about us. The fact that bureaucratic organizations appear as large, robust and formidable as ever does not appear to shake our theory-supported belief in organizations as living entities subject to stringent laws permitting only the fittest to survive. Indeed, our belief in the living organization is likely to be so strong that we fail to notice that the theory has shifted from telling us about the way organizations are to telling us how they ought to be. In thinking about the dazzling prospect of a world in which organizations followed the theory by adapting to a benign, well-intentioned environment, we forget that the role of theory is to tell us the way things are rather than how they ought to be or how we should like them to be. Our image of the organization as an entity, as a living entity, rests upon an analogy. But we fail to draw the conclusion that the analogy is useless when discrepancies appear between the image and the phenomena observed.

In organization theory, the basic reality is the collectivity; reality is in society and its organizations. Assuming the existence of an ultimate reality, the theorists' job is to say how reality--the organization---hangs together or how it might be changed so that it would hang together even more effectively.[10] Thus, theory about organizations has become a justification of the way social reality is organized rather than an explanation of it. And theory becomes more important than research because it tells us what we can never perceive directly with our senses; it tells us the ultimate reality behind the appearance of things and it establishes a view which is essentially beyond confirmation or disproof by mere research. Thus organization theorists become apologists and exegetes rather than observers and clarifiers.

An alternative view begins with the individual and seeks to understand his interpretation of the world around him. The theory which emerges must be grounded in data from particular organizations.[11] That these data will be glossed with the meanings and purposes of those people and places is the whole point of this view. Thus the aim of theory is to understand how that glossing of reality goes on at one time and place and to compare it with what goes on in different times and places. Similarly organizations are to be understood in terms of people's beliefs about their behaviour within them. Theory thus becomes the sets of meanings which yield insight and understanding of people's behaviour. These theories are likely to be as diverse as the sets of human meaning and understandings which they are to explain. In this perspective, the hope for a universal theory of organization collapses into multifaceted images of organization as varied as the cultures which support them.

The imperial role of theory in interpreting experience to the novice is seen in Griffiths' contention that "the proper place of theory in preparation programs is to give administrators an insight into how theoreticians think about administration and organizational behaviour, to understand and interpret theory-based research, and to provide a frame of reference in which to conceptualize problems."[12] Theory and ideology are thus closely aligned, as Marx and Engles pointed out in *The German Ideology*. Ideology in their view is in product of an elite class of people who devote their time to thinking and who produce for others the forms of thought which lend meaning to their experience. These ideologues provide the categories of thought which determine what can become conscious through

communication and the entire social process we recognize as organization. What is excluded from a prevailing ideology remains inchoate and therefore impotent. Theoreticians create ideologies, but they come by no means exclusively from that source. They find their beginnings in the minds of poets, saints, and politicians, and then move into an institutionalization of the charismatic vision, as Weber has so well described it. John Maynard Keynes recognized this process too in the famous passage in which he notes that the revolutionary's tract of today probably reflects an academic's scribbings of yesteryear. Similarly, Hollywood's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* expresses in terms understandable to mass audiences what R.D. Laing means when he says sanity and insanity are socially determined. If we are to have an organization theory which accounts for more than meanings which theoreticians impose on reality, the theory must deal with experience in the organization and the symbols which give meaning to persons involved with the organization.

How Should Research Into Organizations Proceed?

The naturalist assumptions of physical science suffuse much of research in organization theory. Theory in this view is something which scientists build, largely from the armchair, by thinking up ultimate explanations for the phenomena observed. Contrary to accepted opinions, Kuhn has argued that such theory is never open to disproof and serves instead as a consensual agreement among scientists about what procedures shall constitute scientific activity and hence which explanations will count as scientific explanations. [14]

Research in the naturalist mode is common when organization theory is "tested". A few years ago, theorists in educational administration were much concerned with the "organizational climate" of schools, and we came to believe that organizations have climates in about the same way that people have personalities. [15] Since measuring a school climate required only the administration of a few questionnaires and some whiz-bang factor analyses, it was easy enough to diagnose personality ailments in school organization and to suggest that schools with bad personalities should improve them. What these analyses failed to tell us was how leadership, climate, or health arises in an organization and how to make them meaningful to persons involved in the organization. Lacking this understanding, we can do very little as theoreticians and researchers to "improve" leadership, climate, or health in an organization. We thus move on to develop "theory" along new organizational dimensions and to "test" it through new research.

What does it mean when we come to a social system and speak, as some researchers do, of holding social class constant while we observe the effect of school resources upon achievement? Whereas the physicist manipulates materials and apparatus in specific, understandable ways, the social researcher frequently makes no intervention at all in the organization which he is attempting to explain. Instead, he does the manipulation of variables in his mind, or in the working of his computer. Can we rely on the suggestion that if we manipulate variables in a social system, we will get the same results the researcher gets from his intellectual manipulation of them? The doubt is growing that we will not, as is apparent from the current examination of the effect of policies designed to reproduce in schools the positive relationship which Coleman found between integration and school achievement.

An organization theory based upon understanding would call in question the heavy emphasis which much of contemporary organization theory places upon quantification, more complex mathematical models, and bigger number crunchers in the shape of better and faster computers. Better manipulation of numbers cannot substitute for the emptiness of the concepts to which they apply. This fixation with numbers without concern for the concepts they are thought to apply to leads to a sickness of social science which Sorokin calls "quantophrenia" and which Rothkopf likens to the *Leerlauf* reactions described by Lorenz. In these reactions, animals go through elaborate stereotyped performances for hunting or mating when no other living creature is present to see or respond to the performances.

If we move towards improved understanding in our research, this direction will lead us towards greater emphasis upon the case study and the historical and philosophical analysis of organizations. It will lead us also to an investigation of the process by which we negotiate with each other and so come to define what we will pay attention to in our environment and in our organizations.

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What Kind of Training?

The claims for a science of organization and for a profession of administration based upon that science have in recent times made a marked impact upon education. For over two decades now, scholars have attempted to improve education by applying organization theory to the conduct of affairs in schools and by training educational administrators in that science. Celebrating the emancipation of administrative theory from the press of immediate practical affairs, Griffiths some time ago rejected "the opinion that educational

administration is a unique activity, differing greatly from business, military, hospital and other varieties of administration" and endorsed a "general theory which enables the researcher to describe, explain, and predict a wide range of human behavior within organizations." [16] The professor supplanted the practitioner as the source of valid knowledge about administration. If practitioners did not know or accept that they were no longer masters of the basic knowledge which underlay their craft, it did not matter. Even the scholar-practitioner, Chester Barnard, claimed it was the scholar's knowledge of the "abstract principles of structure." rather than the practitioner's knowledge of "concrete behavior" which leads to an understanding of "organizations of great variety." [17] Things are not what they seem in educational administration, no more than in other realms of reality. We need the scientist and his theory to interpret them to us. His knowledge, though it may be incomplete and is certainly subject to improvement, has the virtue of universal applicability. Acting on these certitudes, theorists and researchers have increasingly taken over the training of educational administrators.

Can organization theorists continue to claim they posses the social science keys which unlock the mysteries of organizations and the problems of administering them? I think not. What can we do then? A greater emphasis upon clinical programs is certainly called for, but that alone will not suffice. A clinical practice which is not informed by a critical-reflective perspective on moral and social issues in organizations will descend into triviality and lose the claim for a necessary base in the university. A clinical practice which merely enables "practitioners to write their own prescriptions for action" [18] does not appear to differ much from what we now do and runs the risk of falling into the same box with the science of casting horoscopes and reading Tarot cards.

I confess I am not sure where my critique of organization theory leaves the field of educational administration and the considerable service industry which is engaged in training people in a science which will make them better administrators. I do believe, however, that we must put an urgent priority upon improving the basic theory and in directing research to inform such theory rather than to confirm it. If we can adopt ways to look more profoundly into organizations and to make people reflect more upon their experience in organizations, we will probably have gone a long way in improving both our theory about organizations and our programs for training administrators. My guess is that programs which combined an exploration of organizations through art, literature and history with a critical analysis of current organizational problems would do much to bring a depth of perspective and basic relevance to organizational studies and training. And if these programs required both professor and trainee to identify and shift a prevailing organizational ideology--however slightly--this experience would add enormously to their insight into organizations and their appreciation of life within them.[19]

Editor's Note

This article is a response to one by Daniel Griffiths printed in the preceding issue of the Review (Volume 17, No. 1, 12-18.) The Review would welcome observations, insights, and comments on the positions taken by the authors.

FOOTNOTES

1.—Daniel E. Griffiths, "Some Thoughts About Theory in Educational Administration–1975," **UCEA Review**, Vol. XVII, No. 1, October 1975, p. 18.

2.—T. Barr Greenfield, "Organizations as Social Inventions: Rethinking Assumptions About Change," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 9, No. 5, 1973, pp. 551-574.

3.—T. Barr Greenfield, "Theory About Organization: A New Perspective and Its Implications for Schools," in Meredydd Hughes (ed.), *Administering Education: International Challenge* (London: Athlone Press), 1975, pp. 71-99.

4.—The *JABS* paper has been translated and reproduced twice by German publications and the IIP paper has been circulated by the Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration and reprinted in a reader on educational administration published by the Open University in Britain. This pattern of selective attention to the papers also says something about organizational maintenance and support of ideas.

5.—Cf. A. Cicourel, *Method and Measurement in Sociology* (New York: Free Press), 1964; H. Garfinkle, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall), 1967; B.G. Glaser and A.L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Chicago: Aldine), 1967.

6.—Renate Mayntz, "The Study of Organizations," *Current Sociology*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1964, pp. 113-114.

7.—D. J. Rothman, "Of Prisons, Asylums, and Other Decaying Institutions," *The Public Interest*, Vol. 26, Winter, 1972, pp. 3-17.

8.—Carl Bereiter, "Schools Without Education," *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 42, 1972, pp. 390-413.

9.—Warren G. Bennis, "Beyond Bureaucracy," in W. G. Bennis and P. Slater, *The Temporary Society* (New York: Harper & Row), 1968.

10.—Cf. Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press), 1957; A. Etzioni, "Two Approaches to Organizational Analysis: A Critique and a Suggestion," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 5, 1960, pp. 257-278.

11.—Glaser and Straus, *op cit.*

12.—Griffiths, op. cit., p. 15.

13.—For this historical perspective on ideology, I am indebted to the discussion in Dorothy Smith, "Ideological Structures and How Women are Excluded," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 12, No. 4, November, 1975.

14.—Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1970.

15.—Andrew W. Halpin and Donald B. Croft, *The Organizational Climate of Schools* (Chicago: Midwest Administration Center), 1963.

16.—Daniel E. Griffiths, *Behavioral Science and Educational Administration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, pp. 3-118.

17.—In Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Process in Administration Organization*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Free Press), 1957, pp. xlii-xliv.

18.—Donald M. Levine, "Commentary on Dean Griffiths' Presentation," *UCEA Review*, Vol. XVII, No. 1, October 1975, p. 22.

19.—Cf. Michel Crozier, *The World of the Office Worker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1971) for research which sets out to explore rather than to confirm. In doing so, Crozier describes the world of the French office worker and finds it contains little of the alienating effects which organization theory has taught us to expect from bureaucracies. —And cf. Naomi Gottlieb, *The Welfare Bind* (New York: Columbia University Press). 1974 for a study which explores an organizational ideology through action and change within an institution.